SAMUEL JOHNSON AS JOURNALIST

BY

EDWARD ALAN BLOOM

B.S., University of Illinois, 1936
A.M., University of Illinois, 1939

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

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SAMUEL JOHNSON AS JOURNALIST

The purpose of this dissertation is to trace the course of Samuel Johnson's career as a journalist and to show, where possible, the relation of his periodical writings to his other works. It shows Johnson as a journalist on the *Gentleman's Magazine,* masterful at invective, taking issue with periodicals like the *London Magazine,* and as a superior craftsman in such popular periodical forms as biography, travel and science essay, familiar essay serial, and literary review. He is revealed as a practical man, the editor of miscellanies and the champion of underprivileged hack-writers. All of his known periodical writings, whether for newspapers, magazines, essay serials, or literary reviews, have been examined in detail and his position as one of the outstanding journalists of his day evaluated. In the company of such illustrious contemporaries as Henry Fielding, Oliver Goldsmith, and Tobias Smollett, and under the influence of such earlier writers as Daniel Defoe, Joseph Addison, and Sir Richard Steele, Johnson is shown inspiring lesser writers who followed him. Projected against the history of English journalism, he appears as an important factor in its rise.

He is revealed entering by protest and as a matter of necessity what was considered a disreputable profession, associating with editors, booksellers, and impoverished writers, and despite his protestations helping to make of journalism before the end of the eighteenth century an honorable occupation. An examination of Johnson's associations with other journalists has clarified his position in eighteenth-century journalism of at once championing the literary drudges out of pity for their wretched conditions and of despising them because of their servility to patrons and their incompetence. Finally, Johnson is shown in contemporary journalism as a recognized leader, whose dicta on such germane problems as copyright, freedom of the press, and the system of social and political patronage won

him a respectful audience.

Despite fairly recent discoveries of fact about Johnson's life, the student of the journalistic writings is handicapped by the inadequacy of texts and the incompleteness of the canon. There has been no better collection of Johnson's works than Francis P. Walesby's Oxford edition of 1825 in eleven volumes. But, lacking numerous items, it is far from satisfactory. It gives, for instance, only about one-half of Johnson's contributions to the now rare *Literary Magazine.* There are comparable bibliographical difficulties. The bibliography compiled by W. P. Courtney and completed in 1915 by D. Nichol Smith has, with the minor revisions of 1925, remained the standard check list of Johnson's writings. R. W. Chapman offered valuable but limited amendments in 1934 and again in 1940; and the journalistic canon is still expanding. L. F. Powell has been of distinguished service to Johnsonians with his revision in 1934 of George Birkbeck Hill's edition of Boswell's *Life of Johnson,* the greatest of all repositories of Johnson lore; and A. L. Reade in his *Johnsonian Gleanings* (1909-1946) has provided a work that is invaluable for the information it contains of the early period of Johnson's career. For general knowledge of Johnson, we may turn to letter collections in the R. B. Adam library of Buffalo, New York, and the John Rylands library of Manchester, England, as well as to Dr. Hill's fine edition of the letters in 1892. It would be, of course, impractical to cite here the many recent articles and books concerning Johnson that have been of aid to this study, although full credit is given them in the footnotes and bibliography of the dissertation.

The most interesting, although not always the most authentic, presentations of Johnson's journalistic progress must continue to be those of his contemporary biographers and anecdotists. Supreme is Boswell, who contributed most to our all-around knowledge of Johnson. His *Life of Johnson, Letters,* and *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel*

Johnson, LL. D. have been supplemented by caches of private papers and letters found at Malahide Castle and Fettercairn House. Much information may be found in Sir John Hawkins' *Life of Samuel Johnson,* once the prejudice has been culled out. Additional contemporary biographies or anecdotes by Arthur Murphy, Hester Lynch Piozzi, Frances Burney, Frances Reynolds, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Tyers, and John Nichols, among numerous others, have proved valuable to this study. Also rewarding has been an examination of the writing of other contemporaries of Johnson, including Archibald Campbell, Elizabeth Carter, Lord Chesterfield, Charles Churchill, Henry Fielding, Oliver Goldsmith, Hannah More, Alexander Pope, Samuel Richardson, Tobias Smollett, Jonathan Swift, and Horace Walpole. The most revealing primary source of materials has been the numerous journals of which Johnson was editor or for which he wrote. Chief is the *Gentleman's Magazine*; to this, C. L. Carlson, in *The First Magazine* (1938), has provided a useful commentary for the years 1731-1754, and has helped to clarify details in the life of Edward Cave, Johnson's first employer in London. There are many more—newspapers and literary reviews as well as magazine and essay serials—but there would be little value here in a mere listing of their titles. In the course of this study, careful attention has been paid, also, to numerous contemporary periodicals that enhanced Johnson's fame by satire and borrowings, and to others with which Johnson engaged in controversies.

The evidence used in this dissertation has been employed according to the following plan. Chapter I consists of a statement of the problem and the method of treatment, reasons for the examination, availability of materials, allied studies, and the like. Chapter II traces English journalism from the sixteenth century through the eighteenth century, emphasizing Johnson's importance to its progress. Chapter III discusses Johnson's pre-journalistic career, causes for his entering journalism, and his consequent association with the *Gentleman's Magazine.* Chapter IV contains a full dis-

cussion of his two major essay serials, the *Rambler* and the *Idler*. Chapter V is concerned with his miscellaneous writings for newspapers, magazines, essay serials, and literary reviews. Chapter VI traces his associations with contemporary journalists and his opinions on problems of copyright, freedom of the press, patronage, and pensions. Chapter VII is a recapitulation and evaluation.

The term journalism has been employed in its broadest sense to embrace all of Johnson's periodical writings. Such an interpretation goes beyond the ordinary use of the word to include newspapers and magazines and, also, essay periodicals and reviews. As an outgrowth of Johnson's experiences on the *Gentleman's Magazine,* the first periodical for which he wrote in London, all types of periodical writing became his province. It does not appear likely that Johnson would have undertaken the *Rambler* and the *Idler,* nor that he would have been given the opportunity to do so, without the benefit of his previous journalistic experience. It is equally probable that without it he would not have written literary reviews. Hence, to separate his belles-lettres, the essay periodicals and reviews, from his more easily definable journalistic tasks, his writings for miscellanies and a few newspapers, would defeat the purpose of this study. They are not separable.

By ability and personality, Johnson was qualified to be, in the company of men like Defoe, Addison, Steele, and Goldsmith, one of the great journalists of the eighteenth century. He had an immense curiosity and a love for people of all degrees. He loved the city where his curiosity found its greatest satisfaction and where he could make acquaintances that ranged from prostitute to king. Although he entered journalism by protest, Johnson did more than any of his contemporaries, except perhaps Goldsmith, to call attention to the unhappy lot of writers and, by his example, to help make journalism a respectable profession. He did not rely

upon journalism exclusively for a livelihood, but for many years he was one of England's most representative periodical writers. The quantity of his journalistic writings is impressive; excluding the *Dictionary*, almost one-fourth of his collected works are journalistic.

To see Johnson as a journalist, we must view him in the perspective of previous journalistic accomplishments. To know what he did, we should know what others before him effected and what influence he exerted upon succeeding journalists. The history of English newspapers, although already often-told, is of importance here. Johnson was one of the leading practitioners of English journalism, and he was closely connected with its growth for more than thirty years. Methods of previous generations of journalists affected him, and he contributed to the methods of succeeding generations. English journalism had its most effective development in the eighteenth century. Johnson's efforts in the profession covered almost four decades in this century, from 1733 when he wrote his first news items for the *Birmingham Journal*, until 1769 when he wrote the obituary of the Rev. Zachariah Mudge for the *London Chronicle*. After leaving Oxford in 1729 Johnson, except for a brief interlude in Birmingham, spent most of his time in London where he saw at first hand the evolution of British journalism.

While Johnson was developing as a literary man, he was also maturing as a journalist, progressing through three stages. First to be considered is his employment on the *Gentleman's Magazine*. Second is his writing of the essay serials, the *Rambler*, the *Adventurer*, and the *Idler*. Third is his writing for miscellaneous periodicals, which overlaps in time some of his writings for the *Gentleman's Magazine* and the essay serials. Indeed, these three divisions are admittedly arbitrary, since there are degrees of interlocking in all of Johnson's writings; but they provide a useful system of arranging the works for study.

The story of Samuel Johnson until he reached the age

of twenty-nine is one of failure and despair. Concurrently with his taking residence in London in 1738, he began his slow ascent to literary pre-eminence. This date marks his initial employment by Edward Cave as an editor of and contributor to the *Gentleman's Magazine,* and the start of his success as a journalist as well as literary man.

In the first phase of his journalistic career on the *Gentleman's Magazine,* Johnson early learned his powers as a biographer and the necessity of writing in conformity with popular tastes. His subjects were admired contemporaries or other well-known people, and in writing of them Johnson displayed the diversity of his interests and his ability to write in an appealing manner. In factional disputes, particularly in Cave's long-standing quarrel with the rival clique of booksellers who operated the *London Magazine,* Johnson, participating with enthusiasm, proved to be an effective controversialist. In his editorial capacity, he helped to promote the importance of the *Gentleman's Magazine.* He was not a journalist in the sense of being a collector of news; yet his various periodical writings display his knowledge of current affairs and history and show that he was a man of the world, knowing and writing for the masses.

Especially important among his duties on the *Gentleman's Magazine* was editing the "Parliamentary Debates," first written by William Guthrie and later by Johnson himself. He denounced party writing and writers, often in polemics that are timely even today; nevertheless, he himself leaned heavily toward the Tory side in the "Debates" and elsewhere. His "Debates," despite inaccuracy and prejudice, are striking examples of rhetoric. Here again Johnson revealed a versatility unusual even in journalists.

He was not happy as a periodical writer and sought repeatedly to change his occupation. His destiny, however, was inexorable and he continued to function as an editor, armchair reporter, and general contributor to the *Gentle-*

man's Magazine until his duties in connection with the *Dictionary* in 1747 made it possible for him to begin to break away.

Johnson's employment on the *Gentleman's Magazine* marks the germination of his career as a journalist. In the second stage of his journalistic progress, Johnson grew to maturity as a writer of periodical essays. He scorned to popularize them, especially those in the *Rambler*, preferring to accept the judgment of time rather than that of a public whose critical faculties he held in low esteem. Yet in his own lifetime the *Rambler* and the *Idler*, while not widely read, were to at least a few, as one critic of the day wrote, "the Odyssey after the Iliad." Generally, the *Rambler* and the *Idler* are contrasted by the less philosophic, lighter, and more whimsical treatment of the latter, though a strongly moral tone is common to both. The *Rambler* followed the literary and intellectual pattern of the *Tatler* and *Spectator*, whereas the *Idler*, appearing in a newspaper, set forth upon an almost new tradition; Johnson obviously intended to please those metropolitan newspaper-readers whom he had often professed to scorn. A practical man, he was motivated by financial necessity even more in the *Idler* than in the *Rambler*. As a result, he fell into the practice he had censured in other journalists, of writing on contemporary subjects. The *Idler* was written as skillfully as the *Rambler* and still makes very pleasant reading; but it has lost much of its appeal because it lacks the universality of the *Rambler*.

Both series have much to say about the problems of authorship; but here again the *Rambler* is the more significant. Nowhere else is Johnson revealed so clearly as the champion of authors who merited attention and as the derider of the base and the incompetent. The *Rambler*, especially, is to be noted for its critical essays, many of which foreshadow theories crystallized in the *Lives of the Poets* and the *Preface* to Shakespeare. Although the *Idler* has some concern with literary criticism, that concern is

secondary. Most of the emphasis in the *Idler* is placed upon a variety of subjects from contemporary life, which Johnson often satirized effectively.

In the *Rambler*, Johnson's major work of independent journalism, he sought to make an art of his craft. The *Idler* is a belated and modified extension of that craft, and the *Adventurer* is another. As a periodical essayist, Johnson was at his best. For now with relative independence he could expand his talents in a manner that hitherto had been impossible when his efforts were circumscribed by the editorial needs of a magazine. It was as a periodical essayist that Johnson reached maturity.

He began the third stage of his journalistic career as early as 1750, while he was writing the *Rambler*. A growing reputation based upon the *Rambler* and his two major poems, *London* and the *Vanity of Human Wishes*, brought him invitations to write for many journals. At this time he was also highly regarded in literary groups for his undertaking of the *Dictionary* (to be published in 1755). Although *Irene*, his sole drama, had been produced in 1749 without notable success, David Garrick's activities on his behalf had further helped to advertise him as a man of letters. Moreover, Johnson's was a familiar name among London publishers and authors, who knew that he could be relied upon to produce competent essays and reviews. Hence, he was in frequent demand by editors and authors of miscellaneous journals to contribute prefaces, original essays, and book reviews. Occasionally, he was asked to assume editorial duties, as in the case of the *Literary Magazine*. Frequently, he was induced because of friendship to make contributions, as he did to Christopher Smart's *Universal Visiter*. Johnson, however, regardless of the circumstances, always received some kind of compensation. "No man but a blockhead," he asserted, "ever wrote, except for money." His journalistic chores for these miscellaneous periodicals were usually incidental to some major work like the *Dictionary* or the edition

of Shakespeare. This third phase of his career effectively illustrates his importance as a journalist.

A thorough study of Johnson as journalist must include his journalistic associations and opinions, especially as they apply to his formative years on the *Gentleman's Magazine.* When Johnson arrived at St. John's Gate, the London home of the *Gentleman's Magazine,* his associates were lowly, often dissolute, hacks whose sole aim was to earn the price of food and lodging. Johnson's immediate purpose was no loftier; but, unlike his companions, he advanced far beyond Grub Street. Association with men like Edward Cave, Richard Savage, George Psalmanazar, and Samuel Boyse in the wretched surroundings that were the lot of a bookseller's hack gave Johnson a permanent sympathy for the literary slaves from whose ranks he was fortunate enough to escape. His career is proof that there were opportunities in London for writers of ability. Most of his associates remained hacks because they lacked either the skill or the tenacity to better themselves. Viewed in relation to these Grubeans, Johnson emerges as a great figure. He was beset by the same hardships of illness and poverty that they suffered. He, however, elevated himself by his craftsmanship and courage, while they feebly continued to struggle. His leaving the environment of Grub Street did not lessen his sympathy for his former companions. It is true that he often spoke of them with scorn; but he knew that they would remain drudges and he commiserated their fate. His association with periodical scribblers gave him materials for copious writings about the hardships that befall authors and about other problems of authorship.

Johnson's major journalistic opinions grew out of his intimate connection with journalism. From personal experience he learned about questions of copyright, freedom of the press, patronage, and pensions. About copyright he was conservative and judicious, advocating a procedure that would protect both author and bookseller and yet shield

the best interests of the public. This entailed, in his opinion, a long period of copyright for the authors or their heirs, but not perpetuity. He was far less democratic in the matter of a free press. Although he was aware of the desirability of freedom of the press, Johnson foresaw no lasting ill-effects upon human happiness resulting from governmental controls. At the same time he was fearful of the possible consequences if any scribbler could write unchecked against the government and fellow-citizens. Therefore, Johnson considered a controlled press advisable. His acrimonious views of patronage and pensions have become widely known as a result of the numerous anecdotes relating to his dealings with Lord Chesterfield, the publication of the *Dictionary,* and his own writings and conversation. In reality, the evidence, contrary to popular belief on the subject, indicates that he was not chiefly responsible for the decline of patronage and that Lord Chesterfield was not the wronger of Johnson that he has been portrayed. To a certain extent, Johnson even contributed to the systems of patronage and pensions, writing dedications for others to win them patrons and accepting a pension for himself from the government.

As a journalist, Johnson produced an integral part of his entire works, drawing materials from his experiences and his prolific reading and memory. Despite the diversity of his subject matter Johnson, except in some of the minor reviews in the *Literary Magazine* and a few other inconsequential pieces of journalism, never wrote with detachment. Taking a partisan interest in his topics, he was capable of biting, and at times even of vitriolic, satire. This is especially apparent in his examinations of questions of politics and morality. His practices and opinions on matters of copyright, freedom of the press, patronage, and pensions reflect his active participation and influence in journalistic controversies. Whether as literary man or journalist, Samuel Johnson was one of the great forces of eighteenth-century English literary life.

VITA

Edward Alan Bloom was born on May 24, 1914, in Michigan City, Indiana. After attending Illinois public schools, he was graduated from high school in 1931. From 1932 to 1934 he was enrolled in Crane Junior College of Chicago. In 1934 he entered the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, graduating in 1936 with the degree of Bachelor of Science in Journalism. Following editorial work for Illinois publications and news services, he entered the Graduate School of the University of Illinois in 1938 and in 1939 received the degree of Master of Arts in English. Intermittently since 1939 he has been an assistant and instructor in English at the University of Illinois, and in addition to his teaching has completed the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, of which this thesis is a part. His teaching and graduate studies were interrupted by military service from June, 1942, to January, 1946.